

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles

...An Endangered Species

USGS Columbia Environmental Research Center

Padre Island Field Research Station

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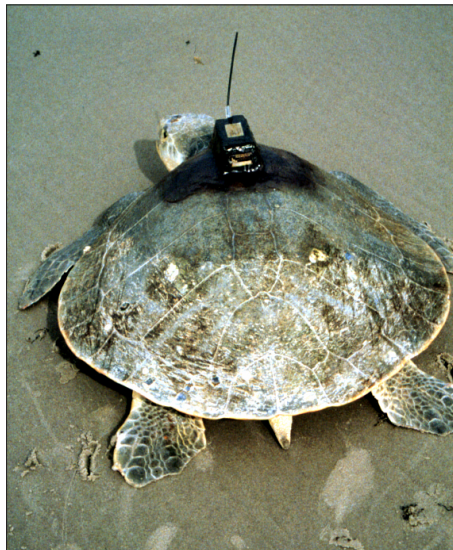
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Following the Kemp's ridley on their perilous trek from south Texas, where efforts are underway to establish a secondary nesting colony, to the Gulf of Mexico, is tricky business. Satellite transmitters are attached to a select number of females returning to the sea after laying eggs, their movements tracked by receivers picking up the signals emitted from their backpacks. This signal tells the scientists where the adults are feeding and resting after nesting. The transmitters can last up to 18 months on their backs before failing or falling off.

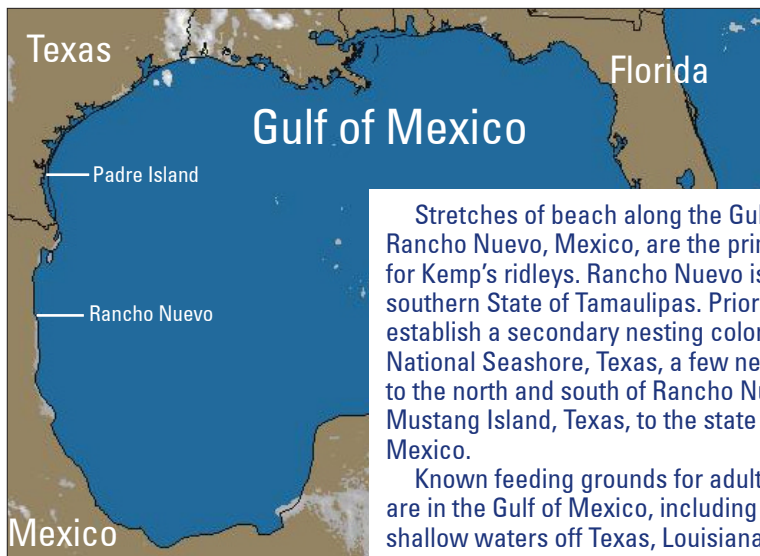
Recent information from the transmitter/receiver data shows that the females are hugging the Gulf of Mexico shoreline, staying in warmer, more shallow waters. In addition, autopsies of Kemp's ridleys washed onshore verify that these adults are primarily feeding on crabs. Just knowing what areas of the Gulf coast that might need special protection is valuable information for wildlife authorities.



The scarcity of Kemp's ridleys about 20 years ago prompted efforts to establish a protected nesting colony in the United States. From 1978-1989, an international experimental project began with the intent to increase the number of Kemp's ridley nesting on Padre Island National Seashore.

This ambitious program had one grand goal - the conservation and recovery of this ancient sea species. Eggs were airlifted from Rancho Nuevo, Mexico to south Texas, hatched in controlled conditions, then hatchlings released along the south Texas shore of the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists hoped that turtles would eventually return to nest and establish a colony at Padre Island National Seashore where protection and care are available.

Now, some 10 to 15 year old mature Kemp's ridley females are returning to the south Texas coast to nest, identified by their coded markings from the hatching program established 20 years ago. The first known female to return and nest was in 1996, hatched at Padre Island National Seashore in 1983. Since 1996, nine marked females nested on North Padre Island and Mustang Island.



Stretches of beach along the Gulf of Mexico near Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, are the primary nesting sites for Kemp's ridleys. Rancho Nuevo is located in the southern State of Tamaulipas. Prior to efforts to establish a secondary nesting colony at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas, a few nested sporadically to the north and south of Rancho Nuevo, from Mustang Island, Texas, to the state of Veracruz, Mexico.

Known feeding grounds for adult Kemp's ridley are in the Gulf of Mexico, including the crab-rich shallow waters off Texas, Louisiana, around the Mississippi Delta, and Tabasco-Campeche, Mexico.



Protecting Kemp's ridleys is a cooperative venture of the U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Park Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Shell, Unilever, Mexico's Instituto Nacional de la Pesca, and many other organizations.